

17 1716

PUBLIC HEALTH.

AN ORATION

DELIVERED ON THE SEVENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

LONDON MEDICAL SOCIETY.

BY

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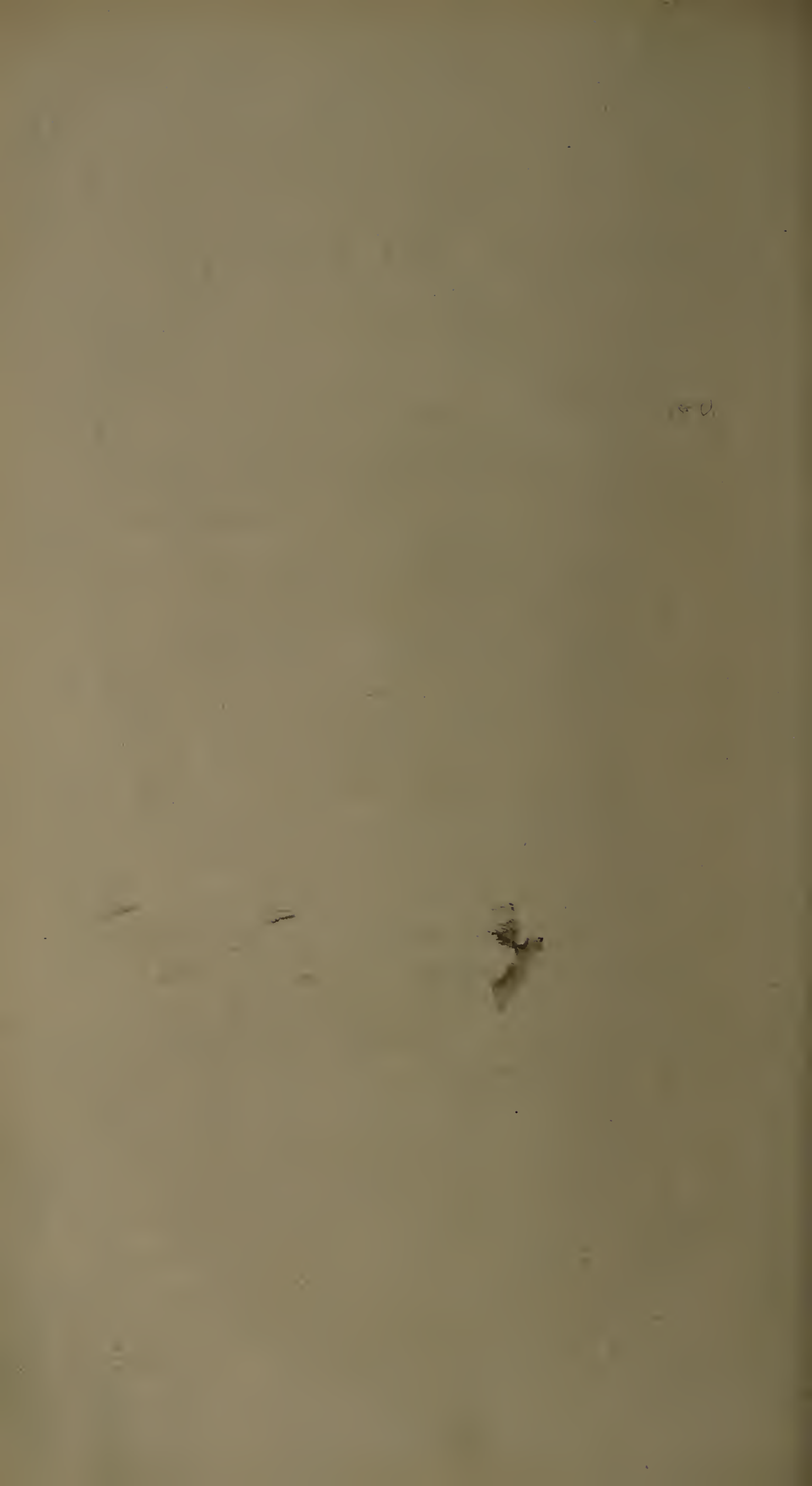
LONDON:

LONGMAN AND Co., PATERNOSTER ROW,

AND

E. SPETTIGUE, 67, CHANCERY LANE.

1844.



PUBLIC HEALTH.

THE most general and the most powerful influence exerted upon the constitution of men and animals is that of climate and locality.

Many familiar examples may be given of the force of the *endemic* causes of disease ; which technical expression must be taken as including the telluric as well as the aerial agents prevalent in any given region, whose combined effect is to modify the living principle, and at times quite overcome the normal power of resistance to what is deleterious.

The production of agues in marshy districts ; of goitres and cretinism in mountain passes ; of dysenteries and liver complaints in various tropical plains ; of fatal pestilential fever in other localities ; the more familiar evils of scrofula, phthisis, and rickets, (called proverbially the English malady), all these, too surely, and too repeatedly, prove this assertion.

A comparison of the results of particular endemic influences gives us the means of escaping from danger, or of palliating the virulence of morbid agents, by removal to a locality having an opposite character. This mutual exchange of advantages is one of the most successful and gratifying arrangements in our power, for ensuring

health and prolonging life ; and one of the most reasonable in theory ; because, in so doing, we remove the causes of evil, and prove the maxim that “ prevention is better than cure.”

The statistical information which is now being obtained from many quarters on the subject of medical topography, is of the greatest importance in directing the migration of invalids, the route of all expeditions, and the establishment of colonies and new settlements.

It occasionally gives a reason for abandoning regions, which are either too severely cold for the susceptible natives of more sunny skies, or insupportably hot and pestiferous to the labourer from the north.

It appears that any frozen climate develops tubercles in the Malay and in the negro ; while we are told that the marshy plains of Demerara, though prolific of other diseases to the Anglo-Saxon race, are both preventive and curative of phthisis. There is some reason for believing that the causes of ague and consumption are antagonist powers, and do not commonly prevail in the same localities.

We have thus before us the evil and the good, and can direct, according to their relative fitness, the natural influences around us.

Of course it will be recollected that, in speaking upon the subject of health and recovery from disease, the medical man is understood to consider them as objects of paramount importance.

He is not accountable for any obstacle that may lie in the way, connected with politics, commerce, or finance.

It is his vocation to establish the laws of his profession, founded as they are upon nature and

observation, and to disregard all other considerations but the discovery and declaration of the truth.

In the British Isles there appear to be no peculiar indigenous diseases, if we except those already named connected with the strumous constitution or diathesis. And even here there are other circumstances which influence these maladies, if they do not originate them, that are not necessarily connected with our climate.

On the contrary, it is our boast, in the present day, to be secure in the possession of a soil well subdued, and rendered incapable of generating the more noxious forms of malady; and of a temperature favourable to the development of the greatest energy of mind and body, unusually free from extremes of heat and cold, known as a general place of refuge from other malarious and plague infested climes.

But notwithstanding our great natural advantages, and the improvements resulting from enterprise and civilization, there does still exist a great amount of disease.

We have frequently wide-spread epidemics, and generally diffused contagious maladies; and the attention of the learned, of the powerful, of the charitable, has been from time to time aroused by the over-shadowing of danger more than usually imminent.

The occasional prevalence of puerperal fever; the rapid march of scarlatina, small-pox, and certain eruptive diseases; the pestilential type of typhus in seasons of scarcity; the unexampled intensity and fatality of cholera; have all, in their day, called aloud for public consideration.

From a variety of causes, the desire for statis-

tical and extended information has of late years been more fixed, and the facts already published and laid before the world, by official statements, as well as by individual declarations, have caused more deliberation than at any former period, on the possibility of affording relief.

If then we ascertain that there are fewer malarious and atmospheric causes of malady with us than elsewhere, we at once establish the very important conclusion, that the circumstances which generate and diffuse the evils that do exist, are, in their essential nature, more accidental and artificial.

Our prevalent sufferings are therefore connected with modes of life and social conditions which are not incapable of reform. Such, for instance, as the precocious labour of children, the sedentary occupations of females, the inhaling of dust and fine particles by men.

There is a great deal that can be traced to what is familiar and tangible—as to dirty and insufficient clothing, damaged provisions, over-crowded rooms, excessive toil, intemperance—often to ignorance and prejudice.

We cannot for a moment doubt, that by investigating and correcting these and many other improper habits of a similar character, much un-mixed good may be done.

The many advantages which arise from “centralization,” and the collection of crowds into large towns and capitals, are not without great drawbacks.

The unnumbered conveniences and amusements, which attract equally the industrious and the frivolous, the co-operation for many common

objects of business and pleasure, the multiplied choice of occupation, and the demand for the talents of the ingenious or the gifted, in ways unknown or unappreciated in rural life, the concealment, and mystery, necessary for many modes of existence (adopted by individuals, or forced upon their necessities), the greater liberty and variety offered to all classes, are too generally counterbalanced by striking disadvantages.

The masses have generally herded together without foresight, or due provision for comfort and safety.

This is especially the case in old and populous cities.

We have narrow streets, dark and crowded passages, with noisome cellars and comfortless attics. There are the suffocating factories and workshops, the damp grounds and yards, the smoking labyrinths of what are called the "back settlements," all swarming with the toil-worn, the debauched, and the brutalized, strangely huddled together. Their scanty or precarious food, dejection of mind, discomfort, ill-regulated or intemperate habits, and filthy places of residence, often in the vicinity of stagnant water, and of decaying animal and vegetable substances, are altogether the prolific source of disease and infection.

The dangers arising from this want of arrangement, and the absence of the true conditions proper for health, relaxation, and natural recreation, are not limited to the labouring drudges, nor to the abject dwellers in low pauperized localities, but hang over, and frequently involve, those even who appear to be far removed and carefully secured from contact and contamination.

The intercommunion continually going on, (however imperceptibly) between the members of any family, their children, domestics, and day-servants, with all the various dependents, messengers, providers, and attendants, forms a chain of connection unbroken between the most epicurean and fastidious, and the most debased and outcast.

Innumerable examples could be quoted to illustrate this position.

It is quite impossible to live and move in society, and to be insured with anything like precision against the attack of some of the most pernicious and loathsome contagions.

*“ Pallida mors æquo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas,
Regumque tures.”*

There is a striking exemplification of this irresistible truth on record in the death of Louis XV., who, living in the midst of refinements and luxuries, with everything studied with a view to his health and security, after a long and voluptuous life, found his palaces and his parks no sufficient refuge from the terrible invasion of confluent small-pox.

It is for the good of all, then, to promote an improvement in the condition, both moral and physical, of the poorest and most abandoned :

It is twice blessed :

It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes !

In devising and in superintending all plans of medical police, our profession must co-operate with the legislature, the civil authorities, with the architect and engineer. We must call to our aid all the arts and sciences now rendered popular by civilization and enlightened government; and join

in providing due space for ventilation and draining, when they have been of old neglected ; or for additional comfort, cleanliness, and warmth, wherever these are demanded, in new districts.

Already it has been pointed out to the public, and to the proprietors of various works and handicrafts, that many of the desirable ends of skill and enterprise can be obtained at a diminished rate of suffering from noxious materials and from accidents ; but a great deal more is to be done under the personal superintendence of our profession, both by general precaution and the minute adaptation of ingenious contrivances.

Among crowds of people there are many things which oppose the full enjoyment of health ; but it is to be remembered there are some great advantages.

The very circumstance of their residing and acting together supposes more publicity and protection than when their work is done alone, and without assistants and witnesses. This particularly applies to children and young persons, who are often liable to suffer from neglect or tyranny where there is no one by to share their condition.

It is well worth the attention of philanthropists, and those who desire the security of the social mass, to contrive some plan for the protection of sick children when their parents are away. The infant-schools, and other places of deposit during the day, are shut out from them when ill.

The parents (whose occupation often keeps them abroad) are frequently obliged to employ very inefficient persons to supply their place ; or they have the difficult alternative of giving up their work, and forfeiting their only means of support

Even where there is no neglect, it is well known to those who are in the habit of attending the poor at their own houses, that there is too frequently great ignorance and prejudice, and that these helpless objects suffer from all kinds of mismanagement, injudicious meddling, and caprice. Add to all this, the danger continually arising from the number of persons huddled together in one room, frequently in one bed.

Under proper direction, it is probable that some plan of placing all children under skilful and responsible persons when the parents are compelled to be away, or are incompetent to manage them, would diminish the intensity of the materials of infection, and prevent a great deal of mischief now arising from accident, ignorance, and at times from brutal inattention.*

But it is not in cities alone (let it be understood) that our profession has to consider the best arrangements for health and well-being. In rural districts and remote settlements it is more than ever important that the presence of the medical man should witness the fulfilment of his precepts. It is here chiefly that neglect of authority, or blind adherence to custom, is found to prevail, without chance of being corrected.

There are bodies of men, too, who are associated, but yet cut off, more or less, from ordinary intercourse with the world, and where the absence of an adviser and protector, with knowledge and influence sufficient to hold over them the shield of the remedial sciences, is felt as the greatest

* Numbers of poor children are annually burnt or scalded, frequently to death, from being left in a room with fire and boiling water.

calamity. All rural factories, all mines and collieries, all asylums for the poor, the sick, the superannuated, the helpless, the insane, the captive, the criminal, look to us for fair play.

In an especial manner, as scientific men, we are called upon to be present with all expeditions and emigrations, by land or by water; always as companions, and not unfrequently as leaders.

Whenever there is a probability of ameliorating the condition of labourers by regulating their work, both with regard to duration and intensity, or by insisting that the stupefying monotony of their toil should have due opportunity of being broken by amusement and heart-easing mirth, we should not be silent.

Whenever we can manage to save them from dangerous accidents, from deleterious materials, unwholesome places of work or of residence, it is the recognized province of our profession to interfere.

Who, so well as we, are entitled to open the door to moral and intellectual sources of improvement?

By no class is the intelligent co-operation of those with whom we have to deal more appreciated or more desired. We have unequalled opportunities for observation and reflection, and, as a consequence, I will boldly ask, where shall we find so little bigotry and prejudice?

I am not ignorant of the great attention which has already been given to many of these matters. I rejoice that much more is likely to be done in this direction; but I think it only right to say, that much more of the control and management of all sanatory regulations should be in the hands of medical men than has hitherto been common.

We have something more to do here than to set other people to work !

Our vocation is administrative as well as legislative : we are not only abstract advisers, but peculiarly and proverbially *practitioners*.

Medical men should be in person ready to superintend the execution of what they may theoretically recommend.

To suppose that there is an inherent virtue in *formulæ*, that enables any one without education or practice to deal with them successfully, is really as absurd as to fancy that the colours and brushes of a portrait painter constitute the chief part of his skill.

And yet this is common enough ! It happened to me, some twenty years since, to be the only passenger in a merchant-ship ; and upon the occurrence of some illness in one of the crew, I found the captain about to fire off some article from his medicine chest. I took the opportunity of examining this magazine of *specifics*, which consisted of a box of powders differently sorted—for in those days we had not got to infinitesimals ! I was much edified at finding the simplicity and certainty to which the art and mystery of the practice of physic was reduced. There were some of these powders labelled as good for a fever, some for a spitting of blood, for a liver complaint, for rheumatism, and so on through the entire collection, which contained various antidotes for many other nautical maladies, both British and Foreign. Upon my venturing to mention the possibility of his giving a wrong direction to these compositions, (which he was in the habit of inflicting upon his men when slack at their work), and upon hinting that he

ought to study diseases, and have some reason for his practice, my friend seemed to consider all this a troublesome refinement; as the names were plainly written, and he was not partial to innovation. I found, in short, that it was not easy to move him from the fixed groove in which his ideas ran, or to lessen his conceit of his own infallibility.

The experience of every day teaches us that it is precisely those who know least about pathology, who talk with the greatest confidence of the efficacy of various specifics, which they seem to consider as if *billeted* to certain maladies, or as so many charms or talismans, capable of producing results without any particular management.

They are deluded by names, and do not understand diseases.

Within my recollection the titles of mixtures, powders, and other preparations, were made to indicate the particular diseases and morbid conditions to which they were considered especially adapted. They were named from their supposed effects, and not from their composition and ingredients. This was at regular institutions, and under the superintendence of educated practitioners. We have, however, made a great stride from this narrow and erroneous view of therapeutics. I do not know that at present, any formulæ are called after the maladies to which they are considered destined. Their aptitude or relation is not declared; they are merely named by enumerating their ingredients or properties. We now do not suppose that because certain drugs (by a peculiar affinity or pre-established harmony) are taken up by the stomach, as ipecâ-

cuan ; or the intestines, as senna ; or the brain, as opium, so as to bear a part in modifying the functions of these organs, that therefore these medicines are *gifted* to cure the diseases of these regions. In short, we distinguish between the pharmacological and the remedial character of the various substances used for prescriptions.

In chemical and mechanical operations the action of the substances which meet is mutually balanced, and can be calculated upon. The result is unvaried and certain. There ought to be no irregularities, because these are purely physical experiments ; they are of the exact sciences. It is only when the vital energy and organic power is called into play that there is any uncertainty or caprice, or that action and reaction is not reciprocal, and mathematically adjusted. This essential difference, it is very clear, cannot be attributed to the brute substance, the passive inanimate material ; but at once marks the peculiar character of organization—the more active *initiative* and independent function of the living fibre.

There seems to be a discriminating power—a force which resists and repels the approach of deleterious matters, and their ingress into the absorbing surfaces. Again, it appears that this power is lost or modified, or possibly inverted, so that what was once excluded by the skin and mucous surfaces is, at these times, attracted and incorporated.

We continually observe the different susceptibility of various constitutions, or of the same persons at different periods, and in the many fluctuating conditions of health. We know that

neither food, nor medicines, nor poisons, are acted upon in one invariable mode.

Now the *moral* of all such remarks is, that no routine can be established for all emergencies ; because the true agents in all remedial transactions are the organs and functions of the living frame, and not the material appliances, which are merely the occasions and instruments—the subject matter—of any change.

Too much stress cannot be laid upon this doctrine in our dealings with the public.

While we have so many fortunes made by kawking about a single recipe ; so many laws amended by the development of principles familiar to us ; so many characters rescued from aspersion by the display of pathological facts ; surely those who stand at the source and fountain-head of all this good ought to be the most considered.

When acting in honourable alliance with all the sciences, keeping up with the march of discovery, and ever ready to suggest useful improvements, they leave behind the single-string practitioners, and the formalists, who adhere to narrow obsolete systems, who follow the *letter* but feel nothing of the *spirit* of their rules.

Were attention generally paid to the natural history of diseases, no one would be satisfied with any single method of treatment ; were it a popular conviction that the experienced reflection and vigilance of the practitioner should in every case be applied *before any thing else*, there would be less reliance upon universal nostrums. Even in the most daring experimental attempts, it would be seen that here also there should be a previous knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and pathology.

The plans of unenlightened people are always limited and meagre. They aim at a simplicity which is not borne out by observation and adhesion to truth ; they fail, not only in candour, but in variety of resources. It is commonly true, that where they succeed it is by stumbling on a remedy ; or still more frequently by claiming as their own what nature was about to do without them. On the other hand, it is certain, that when they are defeated, they are quite bewildered, having no reserve to fall back upon.

I am, for one, little disposed to quarrel with the boldness of any experiment, or the novelty of any theory or any practice ; but I like to see the ground cleared, and the conditions well and fairly understood, so that no conclusion may be jumped at, and no victory unworthily trumpeted forth.

The exalted character and multiplied resources of intelligent medicine in its widest signification, would then be sufficient (without any interference from without) to bring into discredit the follies of dabblers in physic, and the culpable greediness of quacks.

Many false promises made by reckless and unfeeling men would be contrasted with the good faith of the considerate adviser and faithful friend of the sufferer.

But if an acquaintance with the natural history of disease, and the various sciences which are appealed to and put in requisition by the healing art, is necessary to the safe and successful practice of our profession, it follows that the unskilful employment of recipes by the ignorant, by amateurs, or by the followers of *routine*, is dangerous.

It becomes more and more important to supply the personal attendance and assistance of the skilful and experienced as generally and as widely as possible—to spread abroad not only the measures but the men.

There can be no discovery, no conquest obtained by the skill or enterprise of our expeditions into various regions, more truly important than the sure victory established on all sides over the mischievous systems and ignorant practices pursued by various less enlightened people. This, although not always the object, is frequently the best result of such undertakings.

It must be consolatory to those who turn with pain from the contemplation of the violence committed when the customs of other countries are interfered with, or when their territory is invaded, to reflect upon the soothing and healing influence of the medical profession. Carried into all parts, and diffusing unnumbered benefits, it seeks, as the only tribute, information and experience—and this is collected and employed for the universal good. It is not always the same with the other professions.

We can well understand the dread and angry feeling which a vanquished and mortified nation may entertain against our naval and military men. Experience has shown that the spread of any new religion by persuasion and argument, is always a work of time, when opposed by the bigotry of ignorant or interested persons. It is again conceivable that any proposal to fix an entirely new set of legislators and lawyers upon any people, would not be acceded to with great alacrity. And the jealousy and rivalry of traders, is always in

the way of free and friendly relations with our commercial men. But the medical profession has, on every occasion, been met with confidence and kindness. Its good deeds and benevolent attempts are always hailed with feelings of profound interest, and remembered with gratitude. Syria and China will bear me out in this assertion!

It is always something to counterbalance the evils too commonly attendant upon warfare and revolution, and to reconcile the conquered to the presence of strangers and innovators. It is one of the best ways, for all parties, of making compensation. And this debt, which may be considered as due from a powerful and enlightened nation to the barbarians who fall under its sway, it is ever gratifying to contemplate; this is a kind of "national debt" which has indeed some chance of being redeemed.

So great are the resources of the profession, and such the energy and good-will of its members, that we could undertake to scatter on all sides from our "embarras de richesses," and to establish in all quarters the true principles and practice of the healing art.

When we glance at the actual condition of all countries, we shall find that there are strange accumulations of similar conditions; so that *distribution* seems to be pointed out as the leading duty of the age.

We see, on every hand, multitudes existing in the position of the fabled Tantalus—surrounded by the most desirable objects, which they are debarred from using and enjoying.

What numbers of persons, of all ages, sexes, and occupations, cramped by sedentary mono-

tonous toil, when half asphyxiated in their close and dusty workshops, would fain escape to the breezes of the hill-side. Many hunting tribes might safely share the excess of stimulants which the desponding artizan is now tempted to use, and miserably abuse.

We have Ireland exporting substantial food to all parts, yet half starving her own peasantry. In the wild parts of North and South America, the carcasses of deer and of cattle are left to rot, while many of our own labourers are limited to vegetable diet, or nearly so. The mountains of Switzerland are carefully cropped and shorn of every blade of grass; the wine countries are tended like gardens; while many of the richest plains, both of the old world and the new, as on the Euphrates and Mississipi, are either abandoned or unattempted by the hand of the cultivator.

We have, at the present day, the eyes of politicians and of speculators directed to the striking spectacle of the Eastern coast of Asia, (with its three hundred millions of Chinese, scantily fed, and often living in boats and on rafts for want of room on shore), as contrasted with the opposite North-west coast of America (or the Oregon territory), whose only civilized inhabitants consist of some few hundred men, the servants of two or three private companies of merchants.

It is no far-fetched improbable theory, to propose the greater equalization of these opposite conditions.

“Nature’s full blessings would be well dispens’d
In unsuperfluous even proportion,
And she no whit encumbered with her store.”

We may imagine the many powerful elements of knowledge and production, which now jar and fret in opposition and competition, more harmonized and combined in effecting the general advantage.

In cities, in rural districts, in distant settlements, and in home colonies, it is still to be seen whether the peculiar good of each is inseparable from the usual drawback of evil to which each is now subject.

We may fancy such expeditions as have already occasionally taken place, made more frequently and systematically, so as to encourage and hasten the progress of unsophisticated nations from barbarism to refinement.

Already we have begun to act upon the plan of retaining the strength and creative power of large masses, without permitting the producers and operatives to be oppressed or neglected. We hear already a general desire expressed, that education for the mind, proper exercise for the body, and recreation for both, should be fully considered in all arrangements for associated life.

The diffusion of all kinds of publications, now secures so great an interchange of intelligence, as will prevent any isolated members of the human family from becoming torpid and indifferent to the attainments of the rest; yet it is not an impossible thing to allow to the peculiarities of individuals, much that the necessary order and discipline of the whole body can spare.

Should society, anxious to escape from some of the incongruities which have been before described, make a general movement on a more comprehensive scale, an organization of such sur-

passing interest and importance would find no class of men who would more powerfully contribute to its success than our own.

The members of the medical profession form the truest bond of union between the near and the distant, the savage and the civilized world.

There is no occupation which interferes so little with the free agency of others, and when it does command, accomplishes its end by so often appealing to truth, and the laws of nature and necessity.

But in the promotion of any scheme of amelioration, I feel confident that nothing more than a generous emulation would animate our exertions.

I can safely assert, that as a profession, we have at no time shown a disposition to claim more than our due. And, as the patriot of old (when not elected to some office, though conscious of deserving it), rejoiced that his country possessed men better than himself, we would gladly say to any people, or sect, or party, or profession, who should engage in this great work, who should take the lead in this glorious mission,

“ Be stirring as the time—

—so shall inferior eyes

That borrow their behaviour from the great,

Grow great by your example, and put on

The dauntless spirit of resolution.”

